



Times-Standard

Eureka teachers try to disprove necessity of district layoffs

Donna Tam/The Times-Standard

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At 53 years old, Richard Espinoza is having to learn new work skills in order to keep up with the job market. After 19 years of service to the California Redwood Co., Espinoza was laid off in April.

Trying to make himself more marketable to employers, Espinoza, a Eureka resident, signed up for a computer and business training class at the Eureka Adult School, and he said the experience has been rewarding. After taking his summer class at the school, he will be going on to College of the Redwoods to work toward getting a job with the water district.

He joins many other middle-age adults who utilize the Eureka Adult School programs and are scared that their classes will get cut since the Eureka City Schools district announced it will be laying off all of the school's staff this summer.

The school also runs GED and high school diploma programs, as well as college prep courses and English learner classes, fitness, and adaptive education classes.

"This is just crucial to me," Wanda Naylor, a Blue Lake resident, said of her classes at the school. She called the layoffs and related elimination of programs "scary."

The Eureka Teachers Association is trying to prove

that the district's application of a rarely used education code to justify the summer layoffs is unnecessary. Of the 36 employees being laid off, six are considered permanent employees, including Espinoza's and Naylor's instructor.

During hearings conducted Friday, Eureka City Schools argued that it has proven enough economic hardship to validate the layoffs, joining dozens of other school districts throughout the state. ECS is the only district in Humboldt and Mendocino counties doing summer layoffs, according to attorney Paul Hagen, who represented the ETA in the hearings.

The decision from the hearing will be released by Aug. 6.

Superintendent Gregg Haulk said in his testimony that the layoffs are necessary due to a lack of funding. Funding that is available lacks flexibility for K-12, but this is not the case for the adult school funding. Haulk has said in the past that not all programs at the adult school will be eliminated, but the district will build the program back as it understands its financial situation better in the coming months.

ECS legal counsel Steve Hartzell said during closing statements that the school district has proven it needs the funds that will be saved through the Adult School layoffs to help subsidize the district's K-12 programs, for which state funding has been dwindling.

He emphasized that the school board had the discretion to determine whether the terminations were necessary.

"Ultimately, those decisions are appropriately at the hands of the board," he said.

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Hartzell's argument centered around validating the board's tight budget, which was approved in June.

For the ETA, Hagen argued that the district's budget situation could not justify its summer layoffs, pointing out that the district recently received some stimulus funding earmarked for education.

The district's chief business official, Richard Hanger, confirmed that the district did receive notice of the funding Thursday, adding that the \$1.2 million comes with restrictions. The district expects to come into another \$1.2 million as well.

Hagen also referred to the testimony of Randall Perry, an employee of the California Teacher's Association who has assisted teachers in union negotiations and conducted financial investigations for the last 10 years. Having looked over the ECS budget, he determined that the school district actually had a surplus of nearly \$2.5 million.

Hanger said the budget has not been adjusted for the stimulus money, or other conditions that may have changed since the budget was first adopted in February. The district is waiting on the next revise to crunch its new numbers, he said, adding that boards are always making adjustments to budgets throughout the school year.

Hagen said the determination over layoffs is not related to where the budget will be, but where it is now.

"What we're dealing with is what we have now," he said.

Back at the Adult School, Naylor and her other classmates discussed how the program benefits

disabled and low-income adults who are looking to gain new skills in order to find work. Naylor said she has auditory disabilities and had trouble hearing lectures in a traditional classroom, but the Adult School works for her. She said she doesn't know where she will find alternative programs that are affordable if her programs are eliminated.

"This is keeping us from just hitting the bottom," she said.

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